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ABSTRACT

Any discussion of educational transformation today should consider a community-oriented pedagogy. This paper describes the administrative-education curriculum at George Mason University's Institute for Educational Transformation, which was organized around the unifying theme of the "American Dream." The most important reason for doing this is that public education in the United States is often conceptualized or perceived as a vehicle for helping individuals and society fulfill their "American Dream." Students need to reflect on the interconnections among and between the "American Dream", public education, and democracy. The program brought in various community voices to initiate, facilitate, and/or strengthen an ongoing dialogue between teachers and representatives from the different segments of northern Virginia society. In addition, teachers in the program were required to walk through school neighborhoods and to conduct two indepth interviews with parents. Listening to community voices in the school-based master's program motivated teachers to engage in a critical dialogue with community leaders, parents, and youngsters. "Community Voices" engaged in dialogue during the 2-week intensive summer session included: "African American Voices"; "Youth Voices: Preventing Gang Activity"; "A Voice from Asia"; and a "Voice from Latin America." The experience also provided teachers with firsthand knowledge of these groups' concerns about education, their perceptions about schools, and the many alternative ways that exist to work together. This is particularly important in Arlington, Virginia, where teachers must deal with many unfamiliar social, cultural, and economic issues that have a tremendous effect on education. (LMG)

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Engaging Community Voices for More Democratic Schooling

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Engaging Community Voices for More Democratic Schooling

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"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

The Road Not Taken
Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Any discussion of educational transformation these days should consider a community-oriented pedagogy. Michael Timpane and Rob Reich suggest that our schools should be transformed into educational community-based organizations that work in partnership with other local community agencies to address and support the well-being of students.[1] Numerous strategies could be used to achieve the goal of engaging local communities in the educational process. Encouraging a respectful dialogue, at all levels, between teachers and representatives of local communities could be facilitated and strengthened. Teachers could use qualitative ethnographic methods to engage in action research. This would provide them with opportunities to systematically see and understand their schools and communities through the lenses of their students, parents, and community leaders.

As the curriculum's unifying theme, a group of colleagues at George Mason University's Institute for Educational Transformation chose the American Dream. We did this for a number of reasons the most important of which is that public education in the United

States is often conceptualized or perceived as a vehicle for helping individuals and society fulfill their American Dream. As stated in the program syllabus:

> "People think about the American Dream in a variety of ways. For some, it is the opportunity for personal and/or political freedoms. For some, it is the chance to pursue prosperity. Others see it as holding the promise for and education; still others as a social experiment offering human dignity."[2]

Therefore, it was important for our students to reflect on the interconnections among and between the American Dream, public education and democracy.

At the end of the first week, we asked our students what were their dreams about this course. One commented:

> "My whole way of looking at my profession was transformed this week. I will never again interact with my students the same way I have in the past."

Another one commented:

> "My dreams for the school and community are for no one to feel marginalized. To work at reaching out to those that do not feel welcomed is important. I want them to each realize what the American Dream means to them and to realize their possibilities."

George Mason University's School-based Masters program in the Institute for Educational Transformation includes bringing "community voices" to the university to

initiate, facilitate and/or strengthen an ongoing dialogue between teachers and representatives from the different segments of the Northern Virginia society. Just as Paulo Freire stated, dialogue between students and teachers is essential in the educational process and true education will only take place when teachers take into consideration their students views and perceptions.[3] This is particularly important in an educational environment such as Northern Virginia that has recently experienced major demographic changes.

We designed three major activities. The first included inviting teachers, organized in school teams, to spend an entire afternoon walking through the neighborhood where their schools are located or through another neighborhood which would be somehow different from the one where they lived. We encouraged them through this visit, when applicable, to drop by a local school and a community-based organization, and to search the area for multicultural realities. This became a powerful eye-opening experience to several teachers who, due to their busy schedules, acknowledged that this was one of the few times that they walked at leisure through the neighboring streets where their schools were located and meeting informally with several of their parents and students. After this experience, several teachers expressed their desire to make these community visits more often. One suggested:

> "I want to go into their [students'] community and see what is going on there. What kind of baggage are my students bringing into the classroom that may relate to classroom problems."

As a supplement to this experience, we invited several Arlington parents as well as representatives from a wide range of community groups to address our teachers and answer their questions. These included parents and youngsters belonging to various

socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic and age groups. Our guest speakers involved representatives of such organizations as the Arlington County Council of the Parent/Teacher Associations (PTAs), the Barrios Unidos (a grassroots organization of former gang members) as well as individuals who described the Asian, African American, and Latino points of view. At the end of these presentations, one student commented:

> "This class has made me look at myself in a different light. I have always felt that I was a fair teacher and related all students without regard for their color, religion, sex, etc. After this class, I feel that I was wrong. I have to look at all aspects of my students and celebrate their diversity. One interesting thing I have learned is that immigrants seem pleased to be asked about themselves. One person even said "*now I feel as if you are my good friend.*"

Finally, as a follow-up, at the end of the summer session, we asked our students to conduct two in depth interviews with parents with whom they had had or have some type of professional contact. The purpose of these interviews was to develop an open, two-way communication channel with parents, aware that there are a variety of traditional and non traditional parental roles. This exercise gave the teachers and the parents with whom they spoke an opportunity to exchange ideas about their views of the educational process, to learn more about the families where their students come from and to discuss alternative ways to strengthen communications between home and schools. As one of our students commented in a journal entry:

> "I think our focus on parental involvement in class and my reflection on the parent surveys caused a conscious effort on my part to have an actual discussion with them, not just talking to parents. We talked about what we can do to help the child."

In this presentation I will first describe Arlington County, a Northern Virginia school community that has experienced major demographic changes. Then I will share some of the community voices heard by the summer 1996 course participants. I will close with some examples of how we engage community groups in dialogue, and how they begin to transform their reality by initiating activities to help solve their own problems.

I

Arlington County, Virginia

Arlington County, Virginia, one of the two sites of our School-based Masters program, is one of the most densely populated jurisdictions in the country. Its 1997 estimated population is 185,500, despite having the smallest land area of any county in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Arlington School Division is the 12th largest of Virginia's 136 school divisions. Arlington Public Schools, with its 17,500 student population is regionally known for its top quality educational programs, for its flexible programs to meet the needs of individual students, as well as for its broadly-based community support.

During the past two decades, because of two large migratory waves from Southeast Asia and Central and South America, Arlington's schools have received many students born

and raised in dozens of different countries, speaking more than seventy different languages and whose parents have fled their home countries as a result of civil strife or war. As a result of these waves, the demographic composition of Arlington's student population has changed--from being a predominantly white school district, to one where almost sixty percent of its student population are minorities. For example, currently more than 58 percent are minority (31 percent Hispanic, 17 percent African American, 10 percent Asian). Furthermore, some 40 percent of its student population speak a language other than English at home, although the majority of these children are elementary school students born in the United States.[4] Parallel to these phenomena, Arlington schools are increasingly becoming economically and educationally bimodal. One segment of its population comes from high income, highly educated families, while the other can be categorized as low income with low educational backgrounds.

An important social indicator of the Arlington student population is that 38 percent receive free or reduced price meals. Many of these children are considered at risk because of the external or internal conflicts in their neighborhoods, such as unstable parent working conditions, low family incomes, and racial and ethnic tensions augmented by language and cultural barriers. These realities together with other factors such as the breakdown of traditional family values and supports have fostered the development of youth gangs.

Teachers who work with children and families who live outside the "mainstream" of American life have tended not to recognize the social, cultural and economic differences within their student population and how to respond appropriately to them. Therefore, a dialogue between the old, traditional, "mainstream" stakeholders of the educational process and the new, often "minority" parents has been limited, on occasion discouraged, and usually difficult due to cultural and linguistic barriers. School administrations often

have tacitly treated these changing issues as transitional, and have considered the at-risk students as "atypical" youngsters who eventually will change in the direction of what may be vaguely described as "mainstream" culture. Consequently, despite all the demographic changes, the underlying school culture in Arlington has remained largely unchanged. Teachers have simply been encouraged to make the necessary adjustments so as to allow time for children to adjust and change in the direction of the so-called "mainstream culture."

II

Community Voices

The second week of our summer program began with a discussion of Paulo Freire's theories of learning and development, especially his encouragement to develop a critical dialogue between teachers, students and other community leaders. Since interaction between a teacher and student does not occur within a vacuum but in a complex social context, the Freirean learning process encourages teachers to enter into a dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach[5].

Engaging community voices within the time constraints of a two-week intensive summer session was not an easy task. Difficult decisions had to be made to sponsor a dialogue between our students and the different "voices" that coexist in Arlington. This included

representatives of Arlington's "mainstream" County Council of the Parent/Teacher Associations (PTAs), members of various minority communities, as well as teenage students who are currently struggling with such issues as violence, poverty or parenting. Therefore, we also invited youngsters belonging to a youth gang prevention organization called Barrios Unidos, as well as students currently enrolled in High School Continuation programs.

By offering alternative perspectives, these presentations generated powerful dialogues with the teachers. The majority reacted in a positive way. Several began questioning old assumptions and some even attempted to re-constructing their worlds. One teacher commented:

> "I am a new and different person as a result of my participation in this two week opening seminar. My outlook on the multiple cultures we all carry within us and the benefits and drawbacks of their coexistence, was an eye opening experience. I have learned to look at what seems to be apparent to me and question *why?* And also, *why not?"*

Another suggested:

> "I see great things in this program --not only professional and educational development-- but also the ability to look at my world and the world of my students through a new *lens*. I would like to think that I deal fairly and without prejudice in my classroom. However, I know that this is not possible because of my beliefs, experience and culture. Yet, I am clearly developing the needed theories and perspectives I need to accomplish this in my classroom and personal life."

The PTA Voices

Two senior representatives from the Arlington County Council of PTAs were our first guest speakers. Both women shared a number of common characteristics. In addition of being white, they were long time Arlington residents, with children who had studied in Arlington's elementary, middle and high schools, and the two had played active roles in the PTAs of the various schools where their children had attended. They also personally knew and had worked with several of our program participants.

More than making a formal presentation, these parents engaged in a dialogue with the teachers. They commented that PTAs were active in most schools, and that each PTA determined its own programs and activities. They also encouraged teachers to reach out parents and to find out what their expectations are for their child and for their child's teacher.

Among the many issues discussed that morning were how to improve parent participation in school-based programs, how to develop cooperative partnerships between parents and schools, and why many parents do not participate in school-based programs. They shared with the teachers the critical role played by many parents in advising the Arlington School Board through its almost two dozen citizen advisory committees. They also acknowledged that since almost sixty percent of Arlington's student population are minorities, getting minority parents involved in school affairs is a big challenge.

The President of the Washington Lee High School PTA (over 1,300 students), addressed the issue of why the majority of parents in her school do not get heavily involved in the

PTA. She also used the occasion to share with us a PTA-sponsored alternative program to encourage minority parental involvement. This was portrayed as particularly important in this high school where during the last few years the percentage of the "minority student population," mostly African American and Hispanic and to a lesser extent Asian American, has surpassed the 60 percent figure.

Acknowledging the special representational needs of minority parents, the Washington Lee PTA had encouraged and supported the establishment of two Hispanic organizations at their school: the Hispanic Parents Association as well as a Latin-American Students Association. Currently both organizations are very active and, in the specific case of the Hispanic Parents Associations, they have official delegates at the school's PTA. One of the advantages of this arrangement has been to address specific needs of parents with limited English language proficiency as well as those relatively new to the American educational system.

Teachers reacted in different ways to the PTA representatives. For the majority of them, nothing of what had been said was new. However, for some it became a powerful invitation to seriously consider alternative ways to listen to parent "voices." After this presentation, one teacher expressed her desire:

> "...to reach out to parents and to find out what their expectations are for their child and for me as a teacher, so I can set the agenda for me and the student to become partners in the learning process."

Aware that diverse cultural traditions coexist in Northern Virginia, we asked our other guests to share with us their views of the American educational system in view of the changing environment.

The African American Voices

African-American community voices followed the CPTA presentation. Our two guests included a parent and a school administrator who serves as liaison with the African American community. Their presentations were well taken, since in the Arlington school district almost eighteen percent of the student population is African American. Furthermore, a relatively high percentage of it is clustered in the county's southern areas. Our speakers stated that Arlington County was the first county to carry out a desegregation plan during the mid-1960's with the integration of its teaching staffs. Until then, some schools in the system had all-black students and staffs while others had all-white students and staff. Gradually teachers began to be transferred: black teachers to predominantly white schools, and vice versa. School boundaries were also redrawn. As a result of these and future changes, in 1971 Arlington's African American communities lost what they considered their neighborhood schools.

The speakers shared with us various examples of their experiences working to bring Arlington Schools closer to the African American community. Emphasis was made in recommending activities that would give parents of color a feeling of "belonging" to their local school communities. Discussing parent involvement, for example, they reported that African American parents have organized themselves in parallel organizations to the PTA, such as the *Minority Coalition for Civic Affairs* or *Parents in Education* where they feel that their voices are heard and their issues understood. However, they stressed that these organizations do not have the status or recognition of the PTAs.

In the speakers' views, currently some parents and children of color perceive schools as mostly white, alienating environments that do not welcome African American parents.

The perceptions that some parents of color have regarding an alternative County-wide elementary school that once served as an African American neighborhood school were also discussed. They urged teachers to adopt proactive measures that would reassure members of the African American community that they are welcomed to the schools.

After listening to our speakers, teachers reacted in various ways. Several became more interested in getting a better understanding on the alternative worldviews that exist within a school community. They also acknowledged that on occasions, African American parents, teachers and students, perceive issues differently than teachers and administrators from mainstream white backgrounds. Therefore, the importance in recognizing and assessing the strengths and resources in the community.

Youth Voices: Preventing Gang Activity

Our next speakers were representatives of a youth organization called Barrios Unidos, whose main goal is through proactive measures to substantially decrease the number of young gang members[6]. They included an adult volunteer and two teenagers. According to these speakers, teenage youth violence is a relatively new phenomenon in Northern Virginia. It is also an exceptionally complex issue. Teenage gang members are usually youngsters crying for help, recognition and positive reinforcements. Most of them come from broken or dysfunctional families, have serious self esteem problems, and are desperate in finding persons whom they can trust to talk. Often they only hear negative epithets (e.g., loser, troublemaker, failure) and infrequently are given the chance of positive challenges. These youngsters are searching for elements that would empower them, including opportunities to develop skills to transform their lives. Often schools are the only places where they feel safe. A big challenge for educators is how to reach these

youngsters, especially given the existence of a "young people's street language," often incomprehensible to adults.

For the Barrios Unidos leadership, gang activity is a community problem and as such must be dealt accordingly and in a proactive way. Youth violence is getting worse, they stressed that it is time to stop denying this problem suggesting that there are no easy solutions. According to the volunteer who escorted our speakers, an important challenge will be to initiate and assist in the development of multi-cultural and community-based networks in severely-impacted geographical areas of youth violence. Violence prevention programs should be developed for people of all ages, they stated, ranging from activities targeted to elementary school children all the way through to activities that will include parents. They mentioned that programs should also be developed to assist former gang members and to give youngsters opportunities to engaged in dialogue about their common problems and to create workable solutions to these.

At the end of this presentation, several of our teachers were particularly moved, by the feelings and struggles for belonging expressed by the former gang members. Later one teacher commented:

> "I want my students to be in an environment where they feel free and safe to have a *"a voice and a choice."* ... I hope that they benefit from my participation by having a classroom and teacher who recognizes them of all they are and all they can be."

The next part of the program included cohort-level dialogues with community members. We invited the other guests to engage in dialogues with each cohort of teachers (average of twenty) comparing the American educational system with that of their home countries, and to make themselves available to teachers' questions.

A Voice from Asia

A retired Laotian-born Professor of Education who some twenty years ago was granted political asylum by the government of the United States spoke to one of our cohorts. Since her arrival to Arlington, she and her late husband devoted most of their time assisting Asian immigrants in Northern Virginia to understand the American educational system and to participate more actively in American society. Asked about her family background, she commented that her husband had held various senior positions in the Laotian government, including Chief of Staff of the Laotian Army, Secretary of Public Health and Director of the National Assembly. Their dream in coming to the United States was to find the peace and safety no longer available in their home country. As influential Laotian community leaders, soon after coming to Arlington, they began serving as liaison between the public schools and the local Indochinese families.

According to our speaker, Asian students in the United States represent a diversity of cultural traditions, with each individual student having her or his own dreams. It is a heterogeneous group, she stressed, and cautioned our teachers not to get distracted by stereotypes and labels (e.g., Asian students are smart, family-oriented, hard working people). Discussing public education in Laos, as well as in the neighboring countries of Viet Nam and Thailand, she commented that it is important to be aware of the strong Buddhist tradition that permeates all aspects of society. In addition, Laos being one of the poorest countries of the world where three-fourths of its workforce is dominated by

the production of rice, many of its schools are located in rural areas.

She also remarked that until relatively recently, given Laos' religious tradition, the pagoda school was the main unit of the traditional educational system. As a result, teachers were and continue to be among the most highly respected professionals in her native country. Parents fully delegated teachers all types of authority. The advent of the twentieth century coincided with an increasingly French educational influence, especially in urban areas and among the elite. During the 1930s, some private schools began to be opened in the capital cities, but in rural Laos the role of the pagoda school continued to play an important role. More recently, in the mid-1970s, after the socialist government came into power, public education received higher priority.

Our speaker also used the opportunity to express her deepest gratitude for the hospitality she and her fellow citizens who had fled their homelands had received in the United States. She shared with our students her work in helping Asian political refugees who upon arrival to the United States neither understood English nor were familiar with the expectations that the American teachers had on them. She also encouraged teachers to be aware and to learn to recognize and build on their students' personal cultures, learning styles and skills.

Teachers were impressed by the gratefulness, modesty and wisdom of this highly respected senior member of the Laotian community. After her presentation, teacher spontaneously wrote her a collective thank you letter.

A Voice from Latin America

A Bolivian-trained accountant in her early forties was invited to share her experiences with another one of our cohort groups. She arrived to the United States eight years ago as a single parent with her two minor daughters. Her dream was to provide both daughters with a solid American education. Since then, her dream has been crushed. Due to various circumstances, she felt compelled to send both back to Bolivia to finish their schooling. The oldest daughter, a high school student, was sent back home when it became apparent that she was getting involved in gang related activities; while the second one recently returned, due to other problems.

She stated that most Latino parents would never question the competence or authority of their children's teachers. In the specific case of the Bolivian educational system, she highlighted the fact that the majority of the children attend public schools, which are free and compulsory but often poorly staffed and equipped. However, private schools, especially those sponsored by religious organizations or foreign foundations, are of higher quality and play important roles. In the specific case of Latino students attending Arlington schools, she highlighted the fact that these students often face various challenges. They must not only learn how to use the English language as a social and educational tool, but must also excel academically in a language they do not fully understand. Furthermore, often their domestic socialization practices do not match those found in school.

For her, an adequate analysis of the Latino student population in Northern Virginia requires an understanding of Central and South American cultural and ethnic values, traditions, customs and languages. The role played by the family, together with interpersonal relations and friendships among Latinos continues to be an important

element in any effort to understand the functioning of Latino society. For example, talking about her daughters, she shared with the IET students that due to her long working hours and lack of close relatives, her daughters were losing their family values and cultural traditions while growing up in a street culture with unacceptable points of view.

Teachers were very sympathetic to her problems and the honesty in which she presented her struggles, especially dealing with her daughters. They realized how important are family maters, traditions and respect among Latinos.

III

Listening to community voices in our School-based Masters program, motivated teachers to engage in a critical dialogue with community leaders, parents and youngsters. It also provided teachers with firsthand knowledge of their concerns about education, their perceptions about schools, and the many alternative ways that exist to work together. This is particularly important in Arlington, where teachers must deal with many unfamiliar social, cultural and economic issues that have a tremendous impact in education. The social fabric of our society continues to change while the culture of our schools lags behind. Significant changes are now challenging many of the traditional views of parental involvement and school-community partnerships.

Many of us will agree with Harold Howe, II, that a child's education is made up of many activities, most of which occur outside schools, and that educators cannot ignore the

connection between a child's performance in school and all the social burdens and cultural experiences with which students have to cope in their day to day life. [7] Education, therefore, should be a shared, collaborative, community venture where schools play a critical role but working in close partnership with a number of community organizations from both the public and private sector, where the importance and influence of each partner is recognized.[8]

One of the outcomes of bringing *"community voices"* to the classroom of the Masters degree program was the discovery by some of the untapped wealth of talent, experience and creativity that exists in the community. Several teenagers shared with the teachers their dreams and fears, their concerns for their personal safety, their struggles to succeed in school while combining long working hours and often playing parental roles or taking care of their younger siblings. Some of our guests acknowledged that the traditional PTAs have difficulty in bringing minority parents to their meetings and in representing minority parents at various school activities. They suggested that accommodations will have to be made to improve both parental participation in school-based programs as well as school-to-home communications. These and other programs will have to be tailored to the particular characteristics and needs of each family in Arlington, if the will is there.

By engaging community voices in our School-based Masters program, paraphrasing Robert Frost, we took a road less traveled, and to many of our students, it made a difference to them.

To conclude, I would like to share the comments made by two of the teachers. One teacher said:

> "My whole way of looking at my profession was transformed ... the community

voices offered so many different lenses to me. It was a "gift" meeting such fascinating and delightful people. Valued insights were brought by our visitors.

A second one commented:

"I have gained a new perspective to cultures with whom I assumed I knew how to interact ... I enjoyed so much, especially the community people. "*Karla*" made such an impression on me. She worked so hard to get to the point she was at, and wanted so much more for ... she reminded me of a former student of mine that I was not able to reach."

Notes

1.Michael Timpane and Bob Reich (1997), "Revitalizing the Ecosystem for Youth: A New Perspective for School Reform," Phi Delta KAPPAN, Volume 78 (6): 464-470.

2.George Mason University's Institute for Educational Transformation. Program syllabus. *Public Education and the American Dream,"* 1996 Summer Seminar. Class of 1998, Arlington Campus. (Xerox).

3. Paulo Freire (1996 revised edition) , *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, pages 68-75.

4. Arlington Public *Schools, Summary of K-12 Civil Rights Statistics as of October 18, 1996.* Planning and Assessment Office.

5. In addition to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, op. cit., see Freire's (1992) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

6.The Coalition of Barrios Unidos is a multi-cultural, non-profit organization who's primary goal is to prevent and curtail youth violence and provide alternatives. Its main mission is to "bring peace to the barrios" through community outreach, leadership development and community economic development. It was established in 1977 as a grassroots organization to substantially decrease the number of young gang members. Some 27 Barrios Unidos chapters have been established throughout the country in California, Texas, Washington, D.C., Washington, New Mexico, Arizona, Illinois, Virginia, and Maryland.

7.Harold Howe II, "Priority Strategies for Improved Learning," DAEDALUS, Volume 124 (4), Fall 1995. See also Harvard University's *Interfaculty Initiative on Schooling and Children.*

8.cf.. Rebecca Crawford Burns, "Parent Involvement: Promises, Problems and Solutions," in Rebecca Crawford Burns, ed. *Parents and Schools: from Visitors to Partners.* Washington, D.C. National Education Association.